

GOING SOLO: SINGLE IN THE FOREIGN SERVICE

SINGLES COMPRISE ABOUT ONE-THIRD
OF THE FOREIGN SERVICE AND HAVE
THEIR OWN UNIQUE CHALLENGES.

BY SHAWN DORMAN

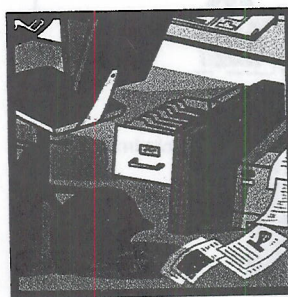
Much ink is spilled over Foreign Service family issues: not so much when it comes to issues facing single employees. Yet singles comprise approximately one-third of the Foreign Service and have their own unique challenges.

The lifestyle overseas for singles can be exciting. Single Foreign Service employees tend to have greater flexibility and freedom than their married colleagues to pursue the career and opportunities they desire. They do not need to factor into their bidding decisions things like family member employment possibilities and international schools, or a spouse's preference for, say, Paris over Dushanbe, when the perfect job is in Dushanbe.

But at the same time, life overseas can be lonely. FS singles do not have the built-in support system of a family traveling with them on the sometimes bumpy roads around the world, and must work to create new networks and friendships at each post. One particular challenge for many singles is the assumption that the bureaucracy and many colleagues seem to have — namely, that singles are more

“available” and should therefore shoulder more of the burden of dangerous assignments and extra work.

Finding Family in the Fishbowl



Many embassy communities can feel like fishbowls, making it difficult to maintain privacy in one's personal life. When embassy staff members live on a compound, the effect can be magnified, and it can feel like everyone knows your business. Sometimes everyone *does* know your business!

Close-knit embassy communities usually welcome singles and include them as part of an embassy “family,” inviting them to holiday dinners and other gatherings. The author, a single FSO in Bishkek, arrived there the week of Thanksgiving, and joined the entire American FS staff — numbering about eight, including the ambassador — for a turkey dinner in the dark, mirrored basement of a local restaurant, where she immediately became part of a very small, rather quirky, embassy family. (Butterballs had been shipped in on a support flight from Europe.) By the next holiday, the embassy singles hosted

Shawn Dorman is associate editor of the Foreign Service Journal and the director of AFSA's Foreign Service Books division. A former FSO, she served in Moscow, Bishkek, Jakarta and the Operations Center in Washington, D.C.

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their own gathering for a few locals and two American travelers who had wandered across the border from Afghanistan, dirty and hungry.

Embassy communities vary from post to post, and even from year to year, depending on the mix of people, post management and priorities, and overall morale. Larger posts in more developed countries tend to offer more anonymity and more of a choice as to joining in embassy socializing or focussing outside the embassy community. Smaller ones, especially hardship posts, tend to have closer communities, where people are more likely to socialize together and look out for each other.

Singles are always well-advised to consider the type of community and environment they prefer when bidding, rather than after they show up at a new post. Otherwise,

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they may expect a great dating scene and long nights out at local clubs, but discover that the management officer's Scrabble tournament is the only social game in town. Information can be gathered ahead of time through the community liaison offices at various posts and the Transition Center at the Foreign Service Institute, as well as from unofficial online sources like “Real Post Reports” on the Web site *Tales from a Small Planet*.

No matter the post, the key to a fulfilling social life as a single in the Foreign Service is creating a support network from local friends, expatriates from various countries and embassy colleagues.

Support Networks

Singles have to seek out new support networks at each post, and it pays to do this early in a tour. As one of the veteran singles on a January panel hosted by the Foreign Service Institute said about starting out each assignment: “You’re only new once,” so accept as many invitations as you can. Even if what you really want to do is go home and put on your pajamas and curl up with a good book, single colleagues advise that you’ll be glad later for making the effort to go out anyway.

Such networks also help singles navigate daily life overseas. “Whereas many married employees depend on their spouses to take primary responsibility for household matters, singles must handle such demanding issues [themselves],” comments Judy Carson, a recently retired FS single. “These include dealing with time-consuming obligations such as entertaining for work, planning travel and moves, taking care of finances and property, finding doctors, taking care of elderly parents and disabled siblings — without the assistance of a helpmate.” Married spouses who both work full-time may face similar challenges, but also may have more income to spare for hiring help when they need it.

Single parents in the Foreign Service must navigate the complexities of raising a child outside the U.S., often without much assistance. Plusses include the ability to afford domestic help at most posts, as well as access to (and tuition for) good international schools at many posts. At the same time, schools will probably have to play a large role in



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bidding choices. And when times are tough for a child, the single parent is often torn between caring for the child and the demands of the job.

Depending on the person and the post, single FS parents can find that building a social life is particularly difficult. Many gravitate toward the "family" crowd to participate in activities that involve the kids.

Unwritten Expectations

In the bureaucracy and among colleagues, many view singles as unencumbered and, therefore, more available for duty than their married colleagues. As a result, singles often perceive that there are unwritten rules that they be first to step up to volunteer for unaccompanied and danger posts, as well as to work during holidays and put in extra hours any time — or all the time. This pressure is not official, but for many singles, it can seem very real and have serious consequences — especially for individuals who tend to be workaholics.

Nor does such pressure only happen at overseas posts. One former FSO who spent several years in Washington assignments during the early 1990s recalls that he and several unmarried colleagues who lived in D.C. were always assigned to the evening and overnight shifts of task forces. They were then required to resolve any action items back in their office before going home to sleep for a few hours.

That general attitude toward singles was one of the main reasons this individual left the Foreign Service a few years later.

Single Men, Single Women

As a general but not universal rule, being single in the Foreign Service presents more of a challenge for women than for men. Not everyone will say this aloud, but most will agree that single men tend to be able to connect more easily with, and marry, non-Americans overseas. Conventional wisdom has it that young, single male officers often come back from certain postings with a wife from that country. In fact, more than one-third of all Foreign Service spouses are foreign-born; and most, though not all, of those spouses are women.

Many countries of the world are still patriarchies where the male of the household is the primary breadwinner, so a working single woman is simply not seen as a possible

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spouse by locals. Obviously this varies greatly from country to country, and the broader expatriate community can offer alternatives for the single woman.

Although female FS singles may find active social lives and options for dating overseas, there is no way around the fact that it is still more difficult for a woman to find a partner to follow her around the world

than for a man. This reality may be shifting as the one-salary household becomes more rare in American society, however. For many Foreign Service families, economic realities dictate that both partners be employed to make ends meet. This is especially true during Washington tours but, in many cases, overseas as well.

One alternative to the "who follows whom?" conundrum is for FS singles to marry each other, becoming a tandem couple. Tandems also can bid on the same posts and can spend most of their careers together. As they rise in rank, they do run into issues of limited job opportunities at the same posts, in part because one spouse cannot be supervised by the other. Tandems may also find that at certain times, one person's career will take priority and compromises may have to be made in order to serve in the same location. Most tandems will spend at least one year apart, serving in different countries.

Today there are about 500 tandem couples in the State Department and an additional 81 interagency tandems, in which one spouse works for another foreign affairs agency. While a degree of creativity is required to ensure two successful careers, many couples find the tandem arrangement works quite well.

The Third Sex: Challenges of Dating Local

When you work for the American embassy, it is often the case that before you are seen as a man or a woman, you are an American official — "the third sex," as an FSO on the FSI singles panel explained. This distinction can serve you well, if you know how to use it. In some conservative societies, American Foreign Service women may have access to places and people their female, non-diplomat peers would not have. Societal norms need not always apply.

But along with the special status of the third sex come unique challenges for dating locally as an FS single. It can

be difficult to ascertain whether someone's interest in you is truly an interest in you, or if it is motivated by the hope for a free ticket to America as your spouse and, eventually, U.S. citizenship.

While this makes trusting one's instincts even more important, the opposite side of the coin can also be true: singles, particularly single men, who have had trouble socializing in the States, may find that dating overseas comes more easily. But as students in the consular training course are cautioned: "Remember, we don't get better-looking just because we move overseas."

Contact Reporting: Know the Rules

One consideration for single officers interested in dating while overseas (and, indeed, for all Foreign Service employees) continues to be the reporting requirements on contact with foreign nationals (including dating, cohabitating and marrying). Single employees should keep contact

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reporting issues in mind when bidding on assignments.

For many years the reporting requirements for the contact policy in the Foreign Affairs Manual were confusing and out of date, based on Cold War-era threats. But in 2009, the regulations were rewritten and made clearer. "For more than five years, AFSA undertook

vigorous efforts to bring about a long-overdue update of the regulations governing the reporting of foreign contacts, cohabitation and intent to marry foreign nationals," explains AFSA General Counsel Sharon Papp, "including multiple démarches and letters to State Department management, collaboration meetings and *Foreign Service Journal* articles. The bureaus of Diplomatic Security and Human Resources worked closely with AFSA lawyers on these rules and accepted many of our suggestions."

The new regulations can be found in 12 FAM 260 and 12 FAM 270. The rules on marrying a foreign national can be found in 3 FAM 4190. This set of regulations spells out the latest security reporting requirements. Although there are strict requirements for contacts with foreign nationals at critical-threat posts, the new rules have eliminated the requirement to report relationships involving continuing romantic or sexual intimacy with foreign nationals from non-critical-threat countries, unless the employee has SCI access.

All clearance holders, however, must report all close and continuing contact with foreign nationals of *all* countries each time they update their SF-86 to renew their security clearance. In addition, DS may still ask about such relationships if they are perceived as a security vulnerability for the employee.

The list of critical-threat posts is still classified, but available to employees when they need it. A good rule of thumb is that if you think a country might be a critical-threat post, it probably is. More details about contact reporting are spelled out on the AFSA Web site at www.afsa.org/foreign_contact_reporting.aspx.

Overall, the new regulations are an improvement in the sense that they are clearer on the reporting requirements. Yet they have not entirely kept up with the new realities of social media and the wide variety of "friends" FS employees may have online. For instance, while some security officers have told employees they must report all of their foreign Facebook friends, DS has confirmed that this is not, in fact, a requirement. ■

Suggestions from FS Singles for FS Singles

Being a Foreign Service single overseas can offer great possibilities to meet and socialize with some of the most interesting people on earth. But at times, it can be very lonely. To help make the most of the unique Foreign Service lifestyle, here are some suggestions from single colleagues:

- Speak up at post. Let your needs be known.
- Get to know people from other missions.
- Know your neighbors.
- Always let someone know where you are.
- Ask for help, for example with pack-out. Hire help. Trade help.
- Team up with other singles to explore and/or to co-host social or representational events.
- Remember that you cannot supervise a spouse/partner, so aim to date outside your cone.
- Take up personal or "extracurricular" projects like volunteering or an artistic endeavor — create a life for yourself outside the office.
- Connect with international organizations and groups outside the embassy community.
- Take advantage of networking opportunities through your alumni association.

— Shawn Dorman